

Perspectives

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Islamic Media and the Shaping of an Arab Identity

by Ahmed Abu Haiba

On October 21, 1998 the first Islamic channel “Iqraa” started broadcasting. Presenting itself as being the only channel of its kind to introduce Islam on a media platform, its aim was to redefine an Islamic identity among Arab viewers. The channel, owned by Saudi billionaire Sheikh Salah Kamal’s Arab Media Corporation, was the first one to broadcast Islamic-oriented programming until the launch of the “Alrisala – the Message” channel on March 2003 - five years after Iqraa’s debut. Alrisala’s vision was to reinforce the Islamic and Arab identities of all peoples with Islamic and humanitarian values. Similarly, this channel was financed by a Saudi billionaire, Prince Walid Bin Talal, owner of the Rotana TV network.

In January 2006, a religious channel from Egypt, “Al-Nas” (The People), began broadcasting, and soon became one of the most popular Salafi television stations in Egypt, as well as among Salafi communities in the Arab world.

Initially, the channel featured an eclectic collection of shows, boasting themes such as music, dance and weddings, leaving much of its vision undefined. Six months following its launch, the channel underwent a radical change in outlook by embracing strict religious programming and inviting some of the most popular Salafi preachers (some of whom were considered Salafi militants) to host its programs.

Despite its increasing popularity in the Egyptian media environment as the sole Salafist channel, the financing was actually from Saudi businessmen who knew little about media leadership – unlike their competitors at Iqraa and Alrisala. The original owner, Mansour Ben Kedsa, did not last long, and after being passed among several partners, the channel was finally Mr. Ali Saad’s.

Shortly thereafter, over twenty religious channels appeared one after the other, mainly due to an uncontrolled media environment over pan-Arab satellite networks. The overwhelming majority of those channels promoted a similar Salafi ideology since most of their funding came from the same Saudi financing.

Aside from the strictly Islamic channels, there were many Islamic television programs that aired on channels that were not religious in nature. The spread of the religious message has contributed to the emergence of a new group of preachers, such as Amr Khaled, Moez Masoud, Ahmed Al-Shukairy that have reached wide stretches of Arab youth. The ideologies of these three aforementioned channels, in addition to those religious programs that appear on non-Islamic channels, have contributed to the

explosive popularity of Islamic media among the Arab public. Indeed, these elements served as the pillars of what we might call the new Islamic media.

Two easily identifiable media discourses in the Islamic media environment today can be observed: The first one is obviously the Saudi-influenced one, characterized by channels like “Al-Nas or Al-Majd Group, and as well as channels such as Al-Rahma, Al-Hafiz, etc., which have been clearly embodied by the Salafist ideology and represent the majority of the Islamic media environment.

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Though narrow in their scope, Salafi stations focus on rituals and spirituality, where women and music are virtually non-existent on the airwaves. Furthermore, political quietism is another characteristic of these stations, making abstraction of topics that are present in the Arab mind today, such as the Palestinian issue. Occasionally, topics such as Palestine will be briefly mentioned, but only by guest-preachers who are invited onto the shows and claim to be moderate, despite their presence on a Salafi channel. Another classic feature of the Salafi stations is the modest and sober production sets, with austere programming, as

well as a lack of artistic input from the technical staff, thus reflecting a puritanical approach.

The second trend that characterizes the other face of Islamic media is a moderate, or middle ground ideology, embodied in the channels “Iqraa,” “Alrisala,” Islamic art channels, such as the channel 4shbab, and religious programs on public channels. All of these stations are characterized by a contradiction of statements both in style and content stemming from their moderate inclinations. Some shows have expanded their range of issues covered, beyond Islamic laws and spirituality. For example, they not only addressed issues pertaining to ethics and values, but also featured women as anchors, guests, or among the general public presenting media stories. These channels started to raise issues pertaining to women, whether within the realm of religious practice or broader issues, which was a clear departure from the original trend.

In addition, these moderate channels and programs provide broader, more diverse artistic offerings, such as songs, video clips and drama. Case in point, the “4shaabab” and “Al-Risala” channels not only showcased the use of music, but also tell-tale signs of Western input with their anchors. Overall, there has been a unique care for media appearance and professionalism demonstrated from the beginning by these channels and throughout their time in the arena – at least until they reached the point of real competition with general entertainment programs. An example of such distinctive programs is Ahmed Al-Shukairy, who acquired advanced high position in polls among MBC channel programs.

These channels and trends had a considerable impact on Arab identity and reach deep across the board. When we try to monitor this change, we have to consider three points: namely, the purpose and format of change put forward by these channels; the power of rhetoric and style; and finally the area of distribution.

Regarding the purpose and format of change, it is important to note that these media outlets did not specify the form of the Islamic personality they wanted to attain. As such, everyone agreed on the necessity of changing the definition of Islamic identity. Since change in itself means to move from point “A” to point “B,” everyone agreed on the necessity of moving from point “A,” but no one specified the form and location of point “B!”

Instituting such a change within Islamic media is necessary, given that the current state of Islamic media describes precisely what is at odds with our current Arab identity. It is often heavily influenced by Westernization in as far as outer appearance, language and the nature of the relationship between opposite genders. The [obsessive] rejection of these Western topics has shaped the programming style of the Islamic channels. Each of these themes is dealt with according to the network’s own premise.

Naturally, the Salafi trend has been to categorically reject the Westernized ideas of physical appearance, language and gender roles, and instead establish textual evidence to criminalize those responsible for perpetrating them in the media. Their long-standing focus on the traditional trends of Islamic clothing and beards, among other issues, further reinforces their anti-Western bias. Therefore, these channels have clearly established how they will portray their premises: the moderate trend has selectively adopted some products of Westernization, only criminalizing those that refer to viewers’ daily life practices and ethical issues. For example, the moderate trend does not criticize wearing jeans except when they are a tight-fit and “low-wasted,” thereby revealing a person’s undergarments. Besides that exception, the majority of young presenters on these channels can be seen wearing trendy, international clothing brands. This moderate trend portrays the channels as being consistent with the Arab and Western street scene.

On the subjects of language and literature, the Salafi trend has generally maintained the usage of classical Arabic [fusha], and remained committed to the predominant usage of religious texts over intellectual expositions and treatises. Therefore, programs based on the interpretation and explanations of written script have been dominant, as opposed to intellectual shows focused on personal debates and justifications. Consequently, the argumentative and

persuasive abilities of the viewers of these programs becomes very limited, as their acceptance of the sanctity of the texts has extended to an unquestioned acceptance of their interpretation, with little acknowledgement of other possible interpretations. In addition, a heightened sense of criticism among viewers has strongly affected their acceptance of the other, which in turn has shifted the situation from disagreeing with the other to criminalizing the other. Moreover, by limiting the viewers’ understanding to the preferred textual interpretation, these channels have encouraged their audiences to become impervious to intellectual dexterity in approaching the Qu’ranic texts, and left them intellectually stunted in their rejection of the anything different.

The moderate trend in Islamic media, without a doubt, has been more accepting of the other, in spite of its tendency to use classical Arabic. That being said, there is a stark contrast in content, with more room for intellectual interpretation, particularly for matters unrelated to worship and religious rituals. You can find talk shows that offer various points of views and political perspectives on topics covering a wider spectrum of interests beyond the Palestinian cause. In addition to tackling a lot of socially and culturally thorny issues, this situation has instilled distinctive qualities in viewers, making them more accepting of the other, more capable of dialogue, and more aware of various issues, which they can approach more freely from an intellectual and critical position.

The third and most critical issue is gender relations and the woman’s social situation. Both the Salafi and moderate parties somehow approach this issue similarly to a certain extent, but not because they have overcome intellectual differences. Rather, they tend to concur because the majority of these channels are funded by Saudi money, which clearly imposes a cultural perception infused by Saudi society on this aspect. Thus, the two sides agree on forbidding all relations between men and women outside of marriage, and oppose the intermingling of the two sexes. However, the two parties differ in how they define and criminalize the mixing of genders. The Salafi trend rests on completely complete rejection of the presence of women on the screen. The moderate trend allows their presence and some types of impersonal, not private interactions between women and men, such as working and studying together. The restrictions imposed by the moderate and more popular trend has made the viewers of these channels more accepting of cross-gender interactions, and encourages a more active participation of women both on these channels and in other activities generated by their coverage, such as philanthropic and civil work – most notably obvious in the Life Makers project, created by Amr Khaled. Indeed, it is believed that the Life Makers project has significantly contributed to the recent revolutionary movement witnessed throughout the Arab world.

These media policies have been reflected in important areas of the current situation of Islamic media. The moderate trend appears to be more widespread and influential, despite the fact that it does not characterize most Islamic media outlets. This trend is barely represented by three channels, and is beginning to diminish within these three due to pressure from the Saudi financiers of those networks. Nevertheless, the biggest reason these moderate channels thrive and enjoy wide viewership is because they present religious programs and regularly appear on non-

religious channels. For example, the presence of Amr Khaled on channels such as Al-Mihwar, Ahmad al-Shukairi and Sheikh Salman al-Oadah on MBC, and Dr. Mohammed al-Oraifi on LBC has moved the Islamic discourse to new areas beyond strictly Islamic channels, which typically have limited viewership. In the shade of the revolutionary movements we are witnessing in the region, it is expected that the Islamic media discourse will play a major role in constructing the new Arab identity – though whether it will be the moderate or existing Salafist trend that will formulate this new identity, Islam will remain the true foundation of Arab character, and will have the final say in shaping the new Arab Islamic identity.



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