

Celebrities

By ALBRECHT HOFHEINZ

Akḥbār il-nuḡūm (“Celebrity News”) is the head cry of a wildly successful music video Moroccan-Egyptian Samīra Saʿīd, also known as “The Diva,” releases in April [[↗Pop Music](#)]. In a setting fashioned after the 1930s, the ever-young quinquagenarian, whom Egyptians prefer to Lebanese super-star Elissa by 70 to 30 percent according to a cellphone [poll](#), celebrates the freedom of the newly divorced woman, a freedom she has just won in court. “See? I left him, and it hasn’t been the end of the world!” is the message the singer performs in a Parisian cabaret scene. “I’m not depressed [...], no, on the contrary, I feel relieved and happy. Turned out it wasn’t such a bad thing after all to live alone! I’ll start my life with an empty white page!” This song, a commentator writes on YouTube, “should be the anthem of all women” or at least “of all divorced, independent-minded, strong women” [[↗Male vs. Female](#), [↗Self-help](#)].

Samīra Saʿīd is not the only female star who promotes the ideal of the strong and self-confident woman. Ghāda ‘Abd al-Rāziq (b. 1965 and three years ago voted “best actress in the Arab world”) leads a set of seven women who, in the “daring” thriller *Illī khtashū māṭū* (“If you’re modest, you’re dead”) defy a male-dominated society. Ghāda [surpasses](#) long-standing glamour icon Yusrā (b. 1951) in Egyptian audiences’ expectations for who will be more successful in their respective Ramaḍān TV series. Ghāda stars in *al-Khānka* (“The Asylum”) where she confronts sexual harassment to the extent of turning around the traditional gender roles, becoming a woman with [superpowers](#) who eventually is “sectioned for the safety of the public” before being released in a happy end. Egypt’s legendary prima ballerina Māḡda Ṣāliḥ who ascended to fame in the 1960s, is celebrated in the documentary *A Footnote in Ballet History?* that presents “the early triumphs, collapse and renewed hopes over five decades.” Meanwhile, another, younger star, actress and singer Dunyā Samīr Ghānim (b. 1985; [4 million followers](#) on Instagram, and a big fan of Paulo Coelho) sums up [Google’s](#) “International Women’s Day Doodle 2016” proclaiming her hope to see “every girl and [every woman](#) in Egypt a star in her field.”

Egypt is the Arab world’s most populous country, and its media produce many celebrities who can serve as role models and projection screens for people’s dreams. This extends to many walks of life; fashion is not the least of them. “Sometimes I get inspired by what some stars that I follow wear, for example if they wear a nice-looking pair of jeans I want to get the same,” [explains](#) a young girl from Tunisia. The style promoted by these models is decidedly global, as revealed by “[21 of Egypt’s models to watch for on Instagram in 2016](#).” And the attitude manifested is the same assertiveness embodied by the super-stars. As *Miss Egypt 2016* (b. 1998) reveals, when a reporter asks her: “What would you do if your shoe breaks while you’re doing the cat walk? [...] I would clap for myself and laugh and not let anything sway my self-confidence!”

As people are intimately connected to a globalized fan culture, the national, pan-Arab, and international horizons blend—sometimes quite literally, as when *HuffPost Arabi* asks, “What if Angelina Jolie was from Upper Egypt?,” [morphing](#) Hollywood stars such as Sandra Bullock, Harrison Ford, Leonardo DiCaprio, Will Smith, Robert De Niro, or George Clooney into rural Egyptians. An [MBC](#) feature on 28 foreign (Arab and international) celebrities “who have fallen

in love with Egypt” is widely shared on social media; it includes singers Brian Adams, Beyoncé, Bono [see also [here](#)], Luṭfī Būshnāq, Fayrūz, Enrique Iglesias, Cheb Khaled, Kylie Minogue, Shakira, Hayfā Wahbē [see also [here](#)] and the Gypsy Kings; actors Sean Bean, Juliette Binoche, Jackie Chan, Vin Diesel, Morgan Freeman, Liz Hurley, and Roger Moore; soccer stars Zinedine Zidane and the teams of Barcelona and Réal Madrid; as well as the glamour queens Lady Di and Paris Hilton. The greatness of one’s country is validated by these illustrious names, revealing the important function celebrity fan culture plays in creating and confirming group identities. Obviously, national icons play an important role as standard bearers for people’s pride in their country and heritage. When Dīnā (b. 1965), one of the world’s most famous belly dancers, is chosen as a model for the Egyptian version of the global YouTube series “[100 Years of Beauty](#),” she is made up in the style of feminist forerunner Hudā Sha’rāwī (for the 1920s); the musical “Star of the East” Umm Kulthūm (1930s); Princess Fawziyya Fu’ād, the queen consort of Moḥammed Reẓā Shāh (1940s); Su’ād Ḥusnī (the “Sweetheart of Egyptian Cinema,” 1960s); and the actress and singer Sherīhān (1990s). Between the national and the global, the inter-Arab media and culture sphere is significant. Syrian TV actor Sulāfa Mī’mār (b. 1976) “[witnesses the splendor of Tunis](#) through the eyes of Hind Ṣabrī”; Hind (b. 1979) being a Tunisian-Egyptian actress famous for having played the main character in the 2010 TV series *‘Āyza Atgawwiz* (“I want to marry”) and who this year stars in *Zahrat Halab* (“The Flower of Aleppo”); she is [chosen](#) to represent Tunis at next year’s *Oscar* ceremony. Syrian George Wasūf (b. 1961; nicknamed *Sulṭān al-Ṭarab*, “The Sultan of Song”) exclaims, when bodyguards try to shield him from the crowds welcoming him at Tunis airport, *Anā ‘āwiz ḥabāybī, mā biddī security* (“I want my fans, not security!”). The [visit to Tunis](#) of Syrian pop star Nāṣif Zaytūn (b. 1988), winner of Star Academy Arabia 2010, has Tunisian media cover in detail how he takes selfies with and gives autographs to his fans [see also here: [welcomed by fans](#) at Tunis airport (his arrival makes the buzz on [YouTube](#)), gives 2 [concerts](#)] [[↗Mobile Phones](#)]. The same excitement reigns when Egyptian superstar and king of romantic pop, Tāmir Ḥusnī (b. 1977) [travels to Tunisia](#) accompanied by Basma BuSeyl (b. 1991), his Moroccan wife of repeated Star Academy fame. 5.5 million fans follow them on Instagram, where Tāmir also proudly presents his [Murex d’Or 2016 Award](#) for “best Arab male singer & successful singer-actor in the Arab world.” The Carthage Film Festival provides another arena where the red carpet is rolled out for the famed and prominent. Tunisian President al-Sibsī awards the Order of Cultural Merit to time-honoured Egyptian-French actor Ḡamīl Rātīb (b. 1926) and Egyptian comedy classic ‘Ādil Imām (b. 1940). During the reception, al-Sibsī [imitates](#) ‘Ādil Imām in a famous line from his 1976 play *Shāhid mā-Shāfsh Hāḡa* (“The witless witness”), and both bond bursting out laughing [[↗Alsh](#)].

It is curious to note that visits of foreign luminaries make much more headlines in Tunisia than in Egypt this year. Egypt has long regarded herself as *Umm il-dunyā*, “the Mother of the world,” and considered Egyptian history and culture as ranking premier in the region. This extends to the world of ‘lighter’ entertainment as well. This year, the actors of the series of televised stage plays *Masrah Maṣr* (“Theater Egypt”), produced in its fourth season, command the public’s particular attention. MBC, which holds the television rights for the play, feeds audience expectations by circulating “behind the scenes” [shots of the comedy stars](#) ahead of the new season, especially of Muṣṭafā Khāṭir (“*Amm Shakshak*”) (b. 1985); by announcing a “[surprise](#)” ahead of the broadcast; and by publishing [family pictures](#) and “rare photos of the stars of *Masrah Maṣr* [before they became famous](#)—see how they have changed!” The play’s

stars provide much material for celebrity gossip, for example when former footballer Ibrāhīm Saʿīd (b. 1979) posts pictures of his “engagement” to *Masrah Maṣr*’s “Wīzū” (i.e. Dīnā Muḥsin, b. 1991). Journalists and fans get all excited before he reveals that this was ‘fake news’ [↗ **True vs. False**] and that the pictures were taken during filming for a new TV series (the name of which is withheld, again to increase speculation around it). Other society news is real: pictures of Muḥammad Usāma’s (“Ōs Ōs,” b. 1988) **engagement** and **wedding** (including videos of the stars celebrating in a “hysterical dance”) are shared extensively on social media. Well-rounded “Wīzū” is particularly known for her frenzied dancing, and when popular actor Sharīf Munīr (b. 1959) enters the stage to shake a leg with her, they have the crowds cheering. On the whole, show business luminaries like to bathe in *Masrah Maṣr* glitz. When the “Enchantress of the South” (*Sāhīrat al-ḡanūb*, after her role in last year’s Ramaḍān series of the same name), former Miss Egypt Ḥūrīyya Farghalī (b. 1976), returns from pilgrimage to Mecca, she attends a *Masrah Maṣr* performance and poses with the team clad in quite revealing clothes; her pictures stimulate obvious social media attention. And just as stars interact with *Masrah Maṣr*, *Masrah Maṣr* draws on set pieces from current and common media repertoire. Thus, ‘Alī Rabīʿ (b. 1989) imitates blockbuster star Muḥammad Ramaḍān (b. 1988; celebrated by the public as “the new Aḥmad Zakī” and acclaimed by ‘Umar al-Sharīf as his successor) in a scene from this year’s MBC Ramaḍān series *al-Uṣṭūra* (“The Legend”). The superstar, anointed by association with the Arab world’s greatest male movie icons, responds kindly: “My wife sent this clip to me on WhatsApp; I respect ‘Alī and I liked it very much!”

↗ **Football** is another field feeding high-profile celebrity news. After Tunisian ‘Alī Maʿlūl (b. 1990) has signed a 4-year contract with Egyptian al-Ahlī SC (the most successful soccer club in Africa), his new managers show human understanding: His wife flies in from Tunis to give him “romantic support” before an important African Champions League match, and after the game in Abidjan he is given special **leave** to travel back directly to Tunisia. The news that Tunisian midfielder Yāsīn al-Shīkhāwī (b. 1986) changed to al-Ahlī causes excitement among the club’s fans in Egypt who still mourn the gap left by “El Magico” Muḥammad Abū Trīka (b. 1978) even five years after his retirement. Unfortunately for the Egyptians, al-Shīkhāwī’s new contract is with the Qatari Al-Ahlī Sports Club, not the Egyptian one. The rumour mill is also busy around rising al-Ahlī star Ramaḍān Ṣubḥī (b. 1997). While speculations about his age run high (some claim that he was still a minor who falsified his papers to appear older than his real 17 when joining the club’s main squad), his manager confirms that he is being **marketed among heavyweight European** clubs including Réal Madrid, Barcelona, and Bayern München. Arab youth are big fans of international and not least European clubs—but when Barcelona’s Lionel **Messi donates his shoes “to the poor of Egypt”** in a live television show, social media users erupt in indignation at what they perceive as a gesture of contempt. “Why didn’t he donate his shirt instead?” Is there a cultural or a social mismatch at play? Commentators need to explain that a football star’s shoes always fetch prime prices at international auctions.

It is the media that ‘make’ celebrities; glamour news, gossip, and human touch stories are sure to sell on conventional media and to buzz on Facebook or Instagram [↗ **Social Media**]. People avidly consume reports about the rich and the famous’ romantic engagements, weddings, and divorces; they sympathize when their idols suffer illness or accident; they mourn their death and watch their burial on YouTube. The marriage of Egyptian TV star ‘Amr Yūsuf (b. 1980) to the Syrian actress Kinda ‘Allūsh (b. 1982) is presented as the latest in a long row of **Egyptian-Syrian couples**. When Egyptian comedian **Samīr Ghānim** (b. 1937; father of Dunyā

Samīr) is hospitalized, or when controversial Tunisian TV producer and presenter [Sāmī al-Fahrī](#) (b. 1971) is injured in a motorcycle accident, social media quickly pick up the stories. And obituaries have always been important in the attention economy. Prominent departures this year include body builder champion [al-Sayyid al-Mālikī](#) who dies of cancer, merely 39 years old; Egyptian actors [Aḥmad Rātīb](#) (b. 1949) and [Midḥat Qāsīm](#) (b. 1959); and Tunisian singer [al-Hādī al-Tūnisī](#). The [burial](#) of the most famous Arab [movie spy](#) and “[God of Egyptian comics](#),” [Maḥmūd ‘Abd al-‘Azīz](#) (b. 1946), is widely shared on YouTube; and when Nēvīn Rāmīz (b. 1950), the [wife of Egyptian actor Muḥammad Ṣubḥī](#) (b. 1948) and herself an actress, is buried, many luminaries follow her bier.

Celebrities are, however, not only adulated models embodying the perfect dream. Just as they serve as larger versions of people’s hopes and aspirations, they may also surpass the ordinary mortal in misbehavior [[Normality vs. Heroism](#)]. One can point fingers at them when they do not conform to established norms and values, and draw satisfaction from the feeling that one stands morally above them, or at least that they are no better than oneself [[Inferiority vs. Superiority](#)]. They may be vainglorious, such as singer [Aḥmad Sa‘d](#) (b. 1981) who posts a [YouTube](#) video of himself [leading](#) a handful of men in prayer and is criticized for pretending piety to advertise his beautiful voice. They may be out of touch with the plight of ordinary folk, such as cool and creative “Monkeys in Tuxedos” director Muḥammad Sharīf al-Dīb (a “Global Shaper” alumnus) who poses in the metro to support the case of public transportation but stirs a [controversy](#) on Facebook “for taking a photo of himself in an empty metro compartment while talking about community engagement.” They may be dealing in narcotics, such as former Tunisian goal keeper [Sāmī Hilāl](#) (b. 1988) or [Nāṣir ‘Idī Amīn](#) (b. 1981, son of the infamous former Ugandan dictator) who both are arrested for [drug trafficking](#) [[Hashish](#)]. They may disregard traffic rules and quarrel with the police, such as singer Mīrhān Ḥusayn (b. 1982) of Star Academy 2008 fame (“[My goals don’t stop for anyone](#)”) who gets [arrested](#) while trying to break through a road block [[Kamīn](#)]. Or they may be [journalists](#) who are accused of twisting the truth and serving as mouthpiece of the rulers, such as Lamīs al-Ḥadīdī (b. 1969), Aḥmad Mūsā, and Rīhām Sa‘īd (b. 1975), all of whom get a beating by an angry mob when visiting the site of the bombing of the Coptic Cathedral in December. If the rulers, on the other hand, dislike a celebrity, they can simply try to erase them from memory, as when prominent politician Muḥammad al-Barādīī (b. 1942), who fell out with Egypt’s current regime over the bloody repression of the opposition, is [removed](#) from a list of Nobel prize winners in primary school books. After all, celebrities should serve to create social cohesion and legitimize one’s importance; if they fail to do so, they are dumped.

Celebrities may also be chided for another reason. Many of those labelled “stars” (*nuḡūm*) are regarded with suspicion by conservative, pietistic, fundamentalist, or *salafī*-minded Muslims, being identified with a foreign, Western, globalized lifestyle and world, and contrasted with ‘our’ values, with Islam [[Inferiority vs. Superiority](#)]. Conversely, many of these celebrities openly identify with anti-Islamist positions [[Clash](#)]. This tension turns into a discursive issue from time to time, for example when veteran Egyptian TV anchor Mufīd Fawzī criticizes late Shaykh al-Sha‘rāwī (1911–1998) over the latter’s influence in getting prominent actresses to [don](#) the veil. On social media, the hashtag [#al-hashara_Mufīd_Fawzī](#) (“the_vermin_Mufīd_Fawzī”) gains popularity; many Islamists, most prominently lawyer Muntaṣir al-Zayyāt (b. 1956), attack Mufīd as a “scamp” (*su‘lūk*). At the Carthage Film Festival, the outfit of many actresses provokes Tunisian Islamists to [condemn](#) what they describe as “an alarming level of immorality”:

At the Marrakech Film Festival, Moroccan women chose traditional attire, while at the Carthage Festival, Tunisian women [...] paraded in underwear before the world's cameras, swaggering in their nakedness as if that was the epitome of modernity, development, and sophistication. What a scandal, displaying Tunisia to the world as a prostitute! The Tunisia of Tāriq b. Ziyād (c. 670–720, the Muslim conqueror of Spain), 'Uqba b. Nāfi' [622–683, the first Muslim conqueror of what today is Tunisia] *Imām* Saḥnūn [776–854, who established the Mālikī school of law in North Africa], and the learned Bin 'Ashūr [1879–1973, Islamic revivalist opposing Bourguiba's policies of secularization}—this is what it has come to in 2016, after [60 years of] secularization and westernization campaigns!

The tension between the lure of global pop culture and one's Islamic identity is tackled in the drama film *Sheikh Jackson* where the protagonist is a young *imām* who in his teens was a big fan of Michael Jackson but under pressure from his father has become a pious Muslim leader. Still haunted by visions of the pop star, however—Jackson even appears in the rows of praying believers—he eventually seeks the help of a psychiatrist [↗[Psychiatrists](#)]. In the end, he succeeds to overcome his personality split by accepting his enthusiasm for Michael Jackson as being compatible with his current position.

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